

Gulf War 10th Anniversary:

Looking back at Air Force’s dominant role in Operations Desert Storm, Desert Shield

Operations Desert Shield and Desrt Storm served to stress the need for air superiority, modern airlift and rapid power projections; and validated the Air Force’s Global Reach/Global Power framework.

Desert Shield/Storm also proved to be a large-scale practical test of the Total Force Policy — maximizing military capability through the optimum mix of active and Reserve forces.

The conflict in the Persian Gulf began on Aug. 2, 1990, after talks between representatives from Iraq and Kuwait did not resolve grievances over oil pricing. On that date, Iraq’s president, Saddam Hussein, sent his armies to invade Kuwait. The small, defenseless country was no match against Iraq. The Iraqi troops crushed Kuwait and brutalized its people.

Operation Desert Shield ordered

On the day of Kuwait’s invasion, then President George H.W. Bush immediately placed a U.S. economic embargo against Iraq. The United Nations Security Council quickly followed suit. On Aug. 7, after Saddam Hussein refused to remove his troops from Kuwait, President Bush ordered Operation Desert Shield to begin. The goal: liberate Kuwait and force the aggressors back to Iraq.

Headquarters U.S. Central Command directed the coalition of allied forces against Saddam Hussein. Under the command of Army Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, CENTCOM immediately set preplanned preparations in motion. CENTCOM’s function: to coordinate U.S. force deployment to the Persian Gulf region to help defend Saudi Arabia and provide security to other Arab states.

Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles Horner, the allied coalition’s supreme air commander, began coordinating all air actions related to the buildup, and within days, established Headquarters Central Command Air Forces (Forward) in Saudi Arabia. From this headquarters the air actions that would bring an end to the war were put into operation.

Five fighter squadrons, a contingent of AWACS, and part of the 82nd Airborne Division moved into the theater within five days. In total, 25 fighter squadrons flew non-stop to the theater. Within 35 days the Air Force deployed a fighter force that equaled Iraq’s fighter capability in numbers.

In late August, President Bush signed an order that authorized members of the armed forces Reserves to be called up for active duty. Throughout the campaign, Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard members flew and maintained aircraft for strategic and tactical airlift, fighter and reconnaissance operations, as well as tanker support.

Operation Desert Storm begins: airpower launched

Efforts by the U.N. Security Council to find a peaceful resolution with Iraq proved futile. On the morning of Jan. 15, 1991, an 11th-hour appeal by the council for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait drew silence and by noon, the deadline for peace had passed.

Operation Dersert Storm began Jan. 16 as allied forces answered Iraq’s silence. Coalition aircraft “surgically” bombed key Iraqi military targets such as heavily-fortified command and communications centers, missile launch sites, radar facilities, airports and runways. Iraqi ground forces were under heavy day-and-night air attack from that day on.

Great care was taken to focus on military targets. Within 10 days of offensive operations, air sorties reached the 10,000 mark. The coalition’s intensive airpower had crippled or destroyed Iraq’s nuclear, biological and chemical weapons development programs, its air defenses, its offensive air and

ballistic missile capability, and its internal state control mechanisms.

Kuwait liberated

By Feb. 25, spearheaded by the U.S. Air Force, airpower’s rain of explosives had forced thousands upon thousands of Iraqi soldiers to abandon their stockpiles of equipment, weapons and ammunition and surrender. Airpower had done its job. Two days later, the Iraqi military was scattered and defeated. Kuwait was liberated.

Conflict officially over

Although hostilities ceased with Iraq’s defeat, it was not until April 11, when Saddam Hussein agreed to the terms of the U. N. Security Council Resolution No. 678, that the conflict was declared officially over.

From D-day to cease-fire, the U.S. Air Force flew 59 percent of all sorties with 50 percent of the aircraft and had 37 percent of the losses. The overall mission capable rate of Air Force aircraft was 92 percent — higher than the peacetime rate.

U.S. pilots used precision-guided munitions with deadly effectiveness in Operation Desert Storm. They dropped 7,400 tons. The Air Force was responsible for approximately 90 percent of the total PGMs dropped.

At the beginning of Desert Storm, coalition air forces faced a formidable enemy. Iraq had 750 combat aircraft, 200 support aircraft, SCUD surface-to-surface missiles, chemical and biological weapon capability, “state-of-the-art” air defenses, 10 types of surface-to-air missiles, around 9,000 anti-aircraft artillery pieces and thousands of small arms. The Iraqi air force had 24 main operating bases and 30 dispersal fields, many equipped with the latest in hardened aircraft shelters.

Air Force fighters were credited with 36 of the 39 Iraqi fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters downed during Desert Storm.

Iraq lost 90 aircraft to coalition air forces, 39 of them in air-to-air combat; six were lost in accidents; 16 were captured or destroyed by coalition ground forces; 122 were flown to Iran — a confirmed total loss of 234 aircraft.

In addition to confirmed losses, of Iraq’s 594 hardened aircraft shelters, 375 were damaged or destroyed by coalition bombing. It is estimated that 141 aircraft were destroyed in these shelters.

(Information compiled from USAF FACT SHEET 91-03 Special Edition. All photos U.S. Air Force file photos.)



The role of the conventional bomber was revalidated in Desert Storm. Despite being more than 30 years old, B-52s flew 1,624 missions, dropped 72,000 weapons (totaling more than 25,700 tons) on targets in Kuwait and southern Iraq. B-52s turned in higher reliability rates in Desert Storm than during operations in Vietnam. In total, they dropped 31 percent of all U.S. bombs and 41 percent of all Air Force bombs dropped during the conflict.



The Air Force sent 144 A-10s (Above) to the theater. Flying only 30 percent of the Air Force’s total sorties, they achieved more than half of the confirmed Iraqi equipment losses. They demonstrated versatility as day-time SCUD hunters in Iraq and even recorded two helicopter kills with their 30mm guns. Although A-10s flew more than 8,000 sorties in Desert Storm, only five were lost in combat in a very high-threat environment.



During Operation Desert Shield/Storm, the Air Force deployed 256 KC-135s and 46 KC-10s (Above) to the Persian Gulf. Air Force tankers refueled every aircraft of every service — fighter, bomber, airlift, AWACS or Joint-STARS. Some allied forces also used Air Force tankers to do their mission. More than enough fuel was offloaded to fill the gas tank of every private, commercial and publicly owned automobile in Texas and Oklahoma.



The F-16 Fighting Falcon proved itself to be a versatile aircraft able to attack targets both day and night, in good or bad weather. The Air Force’s 249 F-16s deployed to the Gulf flew more than 13,450 sorties — more than any other aircraft in the war. They attacked Iraqi equipment in Kuwait and southern Iraq, flew missions against SCUD missiles and launchers, and destroyed interdiction targets such as military production and support, chemical production facilities and airfields.



The F-117s (Above) flew more than 1,250 sorties and dropped more than 2,000 tons of bombs during Desert Storm. They were the only aircraft to bomb strategic targets in downtown Baghdad, Iraq, and did so with unprecedented accuracy, limiting collateral damage and civilian casualties. F-117s operated with impunity in the skies over Iraq and not one was touched by enemy air defenses.



From Jan. 16 until the Feb. 27, 1991, cease-fire, four U.S. Air Force AWACS aircraft (Above) were continuously airborne controlling more than 3,000 coalition sorties each day. Despite controlling aircraft flown by pilots from numerous air forces speaking several languages, not one case of air-to-air fratricide was reported.



More than 145 C-130 aircraft (Left) deployed in support of Desert Shield/Storm. These aircraft moved units to forward bases once they arrived in the theater. From Aug. 10, 1991, to the cease-fire, Air Force C-130s flew 46,500 sorties and moved more than 209,000 people and 300,000 tons of supplies within the theater.